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Recasting Intelligence

THE REORGANIZATION of the intelligence community announced last week looks at first glance like a mere administrative tightening. The producers of the raw intelligence are simply being made more responsive to the needs of the consumers in the White House.

But the Nixon administration is no more free than most others of the itch to enforce conformity. Unless very carefully watched, the new set-up could be one more device for destroying independent centers of analysis and information inside government.

The reorganization has two main components. For one thing, Richard Helms, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has been given authority to coordinate his own budget with those of the intelligence units within the Defense and State Departments.

Since Helms as CIA director is a member of most of the high-level policy committees in government, he is alert to the intelligence needs of the President and his closest advisers. Presumably he will be able--perhaps with considerable saving of money--to make the work of such intelligence outfits as the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency more relevant to White House needs. His part of the reorganization seems relatively straightforward.

THE SECOND PART of the reorganization involves what is called "net assessment." That is a fancy term for the answer to the question: How does the strategic balance stand between Russia and the United States? That question, with deep ramifications in politics and economics as well as foreign policy, is to the various private and public interests that come to a head in government what a piece of red meat is to a pack of starving dogs.

Under the Eisenhower administration the net assessment was handled by a secret subcommittee of the National Security Council headed by a general officer and working out of the Pentagon. In the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, the net assessments were essentially made under the direction of Secretary Robert McNamara in the Systems Analysis Division of the Department of Defense.

Under the Nixon administration there has been no central responsibility for net assessment. The result has been a chaotic battle featuring many protagonists. In general, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, with the backing of his director of research John Foster and to the delight of congressional hawks, has tended to rate the Soviet threat very highly. The CIA, to the delight of congressional doves, has been more skeptical about the Communist men-

ac.

Under the new reorganization, responsibility for making the net assessment will be vested in a group working under the head of the National Security Council staff, Dr. Henry Kissinger. The official immediately responsible for the net assessments will be Andrew Marshall, who now leaves the Rand corporation where he has been serving as an analyst to take a place on the NSC staff.

Mr. Marshall is by all accounts an extremely good man--experienced, reliable and discriminating in judgment. Presumably he can do a serious job of pulling together the vast range of complicated data required for making the net assessment.

BUT IT IS a serious question whether that office should be performed in such close range to the White House. For the atmosphere in the White House is heavily political. There is no great disposition toward de-

tached analysis, still less to hear news out of keeping with prejudices and commitments.

A nice case in point is the defense program review committee set up under Dr. Kissinger back in 1969. The purpose of that group was to cast a cold, analytic eye on the defense budget, and some of the best analysts in and out of government signed on to do the staff work.

But the President has backed the big spending program of Defense Secretary Laird. The review committee has been allowed to wither on the vine. Half a dozen of the analysts connected with it have resigned, and the senior official presently concerned, Dr. K. Wayne Smith, is rumored to be leaving soon.

No serious high level critique of the defense budget is now being made anywhere in government. That is one of the reasons the Congress, and those of us in the press, are floundering so when it comes to defense expenditures.

What all this means is that the new intelligence set-up should be watched with great care. It looks like a sensible arrangement. But it could easily become one more instrument for restricting information and criticism to the disadvantage of all of those on the outside of government.

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